

Another charge for ousted priest

■ Former Elmiran says she was repeatedly abused in mid-1970s at St. Mary's Church.

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A Sayre woman says she was sexually abused at an Elmira church when she was 12 by a Catholic priest who the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester said Thursday was relieved of his duties for a different case.

Celeste Keenan, now 40, told the Star-Gazette that the Rev. Thomas Corbett abused her a dozen times in 1974 and '75 when she attended religion classes at St. Mary's Church on Elmira's Southside.

Keenan accused Corbett, now 62, of fondling her and asking her sexually oriented questions while she was in the confessional. On Friday, the

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Rev. Bob Ring, a spokesman for the Rochester Diocese, which employed Corbett, confirmed that Keenan called the diocese to register her complaint, but he disclosed no details.

Corbett was an assistant pastor at St. Mary's from 1972 to '77, the diocese said. The church is at 224 Franklin St.



CORBETT
in 1976

See PRIEST/5A

Priest: Another charge

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Keenan, who has breast cancer, filed a complaint against Corbett with the diocese in April, about 28 years after she said it happened. She said news reports of abuse by priests elsewhere prompted her to telephone diocese officials twice to report her complaint.

Contacted by phone Friday at his Rochester home, Corbett wouldn't comment other than to refer the call to diocese officials. He then hung up.

The diocese did not say whether Keenan's complaint was connected to Corbett's removal.

Keenan said that when she was a child, she was ashamed and afraid to talk to anyone about the abuse.

"I couldn't question what he did, because he was a priest," Keenan said. "That's what people don't understand. I was scared. I never asked him why he did it. He was a priest."

The Rochester Diocese responds

Corbett was disciplined in the 1990s amid allegations of sexual misconduct and he was on administrative leave when the diocese stripped him of his duties in April.

"I don't know the details of the incident, but the allegations were deemed credible," said Michael Tedesco, communications director for the diocese.

Corbett was arrested in March 1991 on two misdemeanor counts of third-degree sexual abuse, involving a Gates, N.Y., woman, according to a 1991 story in the Democrat and Chronicle newspaper in Rochester. He was a parochial vicar at St. Theodore Church in Gates at the time.

Corbett can no longer celebrate Mass, administer sacraments, wear clerical clothing or reside in any parish or diocesan dwelling, Tedesco said.

Keenan said she was an eighth-grade student at St. Patrick's school in Elmira when the abuse occurred at St. Mary's, where she attended Mass and received religious instruction. She said no abuse occurred at St. Patrick's.

She said most of the incidents occurred in a small hallway and exit area in the basement of a church community center across the street from St. Mary's. Keenan said Corbett touched her inappropriately during religion classes and if another teacher was present, he would ask the teacher to leave for a few minutes so he could talk to the class alone.

"I sat in the back of the class and

Visits by the bishop

Bishop Matthew H. Clark is scheduled to visit the following parishes this month to offer assistance. Priests from these parishes have resigned because of sexual misconduct.

St. Plus X Church, 3000 Chili Ave., Chili: 5 p.m. Mass, Saturday; 8, 9:30 and 11 a.m. Masses, May 12.

St. Paul's Church, 783 Hard Road, Webster: 5 p.m. Mass, May 18; 8 and 10 a.m. and noon Masses, May 19.

St. Mary Our Mother, 816 W. Broad St., Horseheads: May 25-26.

For help

Anyone who has further concerns or who would like to report any incident of sexual misconduct may call Barbara Pedeville at the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester at 585/328-3228, Ext. 215, or the Rev. Robert Ring at 315/536-7459. The toll-free number for the diocesan Pastoral Center is 800/388-7177.

he would walk up behind my chair and play with my hair and put his index fingers in my ears and rub them and ask me 'Does this feel good?' " Keenan said. "I would say 'no' and try to move my head away. Sometimes I'd just sit there and cry."

Keenan said Corbett reached up under her clothes and touched her breasts while she was in class.

She said the abuse even continued in the confessional, where she said Corbett asked her "disturbing questions" about being naked and touching herself.

Keenan, who moved to Sayre in 1999 to be near the Guthrie Clinic, where she is undergoing chemotherapy, said she dealt with the abuse by convincing herself that it was a misunderstanding.

"I couldn't believe it was happening," she said.

Allegations dismissed, at first

"He told me that if I told my parents, they wouldn't believe me, and that I would only make it worse," Keenan said.

That's exactly what happened, she said.

"When I told my parents, they didn't believe me," she said. "They said a priest would never do that. Before I told my parents, the [expletive] would come over to my house for dinner. He was friends with the family."

Keenan said her parents finally conveyed her accusations to another priest at St. Mary's after they talked to the parents of another Elmira girl who claimed Corbett abused her, too.

"They just moved him (Corbett) to

Rochester," she said of the diocese. Nine priests accused of sexual misconduct in the past have been under investigation or review in recent weeks by the Rochester Diocese.

The Rev. Joseph Brodnick, chaplain at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira, resigned last month after he was accused of sexually abusing a teenage girl in Ohio in the 1970s.

"Bishop (Matthew) Clark recog-

The Rev. Thomas F. Corbett

- June 1965 — Ordained a Catholic priest.
- June 1965 — Assistant pastor, St. Mary Our Mother, Horseheads.
- June 1968 — Assistant pastor, St. Jerome's, Rochester.
- Feb. 1971 — Assistant pastor, St. Mary's of the Lake, Ontario, N.Y.
- Sept. 1972 — Assistant pastor, St. Mary's, Elmira.
- June 1977 — Associate pastor, Holy Apostles, Rochester.
- Jan. 1981 — Associate pastor, St. Mary's, Canandaigua.
- June 1985 — Parochial vicar, St. Mary's, Auburn.
- June 1987 — Parochial vicar, St. Francis DeSales, Geneva.
- June 1988 — Parochial vicar, St. Thomas the Apostle, Irondequoit.
- Jan. 1989 — Parochial vicar, St. Theodore, Gates.
- March 1991 — Takes temporary leave of absence (reason not disclosed by diocese).
- July 1996 — Assigned to an administrative clerical position with the diocese tribunal in Rochester.
- April 2002 — Relieved of job and all priestly duties.

Source: Michael Tedesco, communications director for the Rochester Diocese.

nizes that it may not be right for any priest accused of misconduct to continue in any type of ministry, given the great suffering and pain of their victims," said Tedesco, the diocesan spokesman.

Keenan worked as an administrative secretary and taught religion at St. Mary's Church for three years in the late 1980s. When she was 23, she moved to Rochester, where she taught religion at another Catholic

church.

At the time, she thought Corbett had been removed from his profession.

"Then one day he came into my class," Keenan said. "I freaked out. I told him to 'Get the hell out.' A nun in the class told me not to speak to him in that manner. I walked out and left the church and the religion. I haven't been back since."

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